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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a pilot program developed to discover the concerns of the middle-aged and to begin education, training, and group sharing about this phase of the family life cycle. A brief literature review examining particular concerns of middle-aged adults is presented, and the question of whether middle age is a time of crisis or transition is explored. The development of the pilot program, led by a family life educator and others from such areas as nursing, health education, and counseling, is described. A one-night workshop is described which included panel and small-group discussions, and the use of questionnaires designed to elicit information about participants' present concerns and suggestions for future programs. Key results of the quesitonnaire are summarized in the areas of career concerns, time, older relatives, and family relationships. Recommondations are offered for future development of research, support groups, and outreach programs for the middle-aged. The questionnaire on mid-life challenges and a table of results are included. (JAC)

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# PREPARATION FOR MID-LIFE CHALLENGES: THE ROLE OF FAMILY LIFE EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

Preparation for Mid-Life Challenges: The Role of Family Life Educators

The middle-aged have been called the "sandwiched generation." Researchers have disagreed as to whether it is a time of crisis or a normal transition. Little has been organized in formal counseling, group sharing or education about this phase of the family life cycle.

An interdisciplinary group of educators, led by the family life educator, was formed to offer a pilot program on mid-life challenges and to discover the concerns of the middle-aged. Responses to a questionnaire given to participants at three sessions revealed four major concerns: career, time, elderly family members and health.

Results indicated that family life educators can lead in developing an interdisciplinary approach to involving others in taking research to practise in the community. It is recommended that more outreach is heeded for men, specific topics need consideration for development in middle age community support groups, and educational opportunities for lay leaders need to be developed.

# PREPARATION FOR MID-LIFE CHALLENGES: THE ROLE OF FAMILY LIFE EDUCATORS

Middle age has been called a crisis by some, normal development or transition by others. Middle-aged adults have been considered the most powerful, productive, well overall, and those physically and mentally capable of handling the burdens of the younger and older. On the shoulders of the middle-aged rests the responsibility for three generations or more. Women in mid-life have special needs that occur in the 35-65 year old area of the life span. Examples are employment re-entry, menopause, post parental family, singleness, and special medical crises. Men at this age have the concern of career change, the need to value wisdom over physical power, the adjustment of dreams to the reality of their careers and physical concerns. But little has been organized in the way of formal counseling, group sharing or education about this phase of the family life cycle.

An interdisciplinary group of educators was formed at Kent State University to offer a pilot program on Mid-Life Challenges: Sexuality, Health and Roles. It was anticipated that the larger proportion of the audience for the first program would be female. The group organizing the program hoped to have this program as a lead off to further involvement with the topic, to investigate concerns of this age group and to look towards training middle-aged community peers to facilitate group sessions.

## Middle Age Concerns

To develop a mid-life program the educators in this group began investigation into the major concerns of middle-aged adults. The question asked was "What is going on in the lives of middle-aged women and men?"

Review of literature revealed that in 1980 one of three working women was 45 years of age or older. Economic necessity is the major reason older women work. Fifty percent of married women over age 45 now work. Twenty five years of service is likely to be the employer's reward for training a 40-year-old woman. A Metropolitan Life Insurance Company study showed that at ages 45 and over male employees registered more disability days than did female employees.[1]

The earnings gap between men and women increases with age, so that by the time women are 45 years old, they are earning about half of what older men are. The socialization process for the middle-aged cohort taught women to view other members of their sex as competiton rather than as companions, confidantes and friends. So in business, women often get little help from other women. Women's networks have developed, but they do not always cross over into the business world.

Women are predicted to outlive men by nine years by the year 2050. Today it is eight years.[2] Have women become so accustomed to adapting to new events in their lives that they can accept change in their later years with less difficulty? In times of need women turn more to relatives and organizations in which they are members than do men. Prolonged unabated stress yields disease. This may be one of several causes of the phenomena of longevity of females.

In middle age many developmental researchers have noted cross culturally the move of women to independence. Lowenthal (1977) quotes women as feeling

their personality is better, they are more direct and less embarrassed.[3] Neugarten (1975) and other researchers agree that as men grow older they become more nurturing, feel more deeply and show emotions more openly.[4]

Researchers are divided concerning the presence of a mid-life crisis. (Levinson 19 8, Nydegger 1976).[5, 6] Is this a transition phase and no more or less a crisis then entering the job world, marrying, retiring or moving? Or is this a special overwhelming time of crisis to be weathered?

Middle age may be defined as the time when one starts counting years left instead of years lived. Many begin examination of self and ask, "With half of my life lived, now who am I? What have I accomplished?" Daniel Levinson (1978) feels the question is, "What happened to my dream?" Many successful people temporarily see themselves as failures if their dreams haven't been accomplished. They fear life is down hill, fear youthful competitors, fear physical decline and do not realize the psychological and social strengths that come with age. Quarrels are within the self, not between the sexes or with others, and have the possibility of leading to depression. (Gould (1978), Vaillant (1977)[7, 8]

Other studies note that people go through the mid-life transition without much difficulty, evaluate their lives, make a few desirable changes and move through middle age with little pain. The economic and marital cross section of 200 women aged 35-55 surveyed by Baruch and Barnett (1982) of Wellesley, showed 88% were satisfied with their lives and half reported a greater feeling of self worth than when younger.[9]

Rubin's (1978) study of 160 middle-aged women contradicts popular mythology in that her most common finding was not depression over "empty nest" but relief.[10]

Early middle age is the "crowded nest," and depending on one's view, later middle age may be the sorrow of the "empty nest" or the joy of the "postparental years." Much depends on parents now seeing their children as friends and having other purposes in their lives. Some men evaluate this as a negative time because they have failed to take advantage of the time when the children were home. Women who have outside jobs evaluate this as a positive time.

Parents find their prime family roles are once again "husband" and "wife." This may lead to the discovery they have little in common at this stage or to a deep satisfaction with a relationship that can now be closer than ever. Lowenthal et.al. (1977) report middle-aged women constitute the age/sex group most critical of husbands and most prone to reporting difficulties in getting along with them.

If divorce occurs (and it is increasing at middle age, but not at a rate to compare to younger ages) there are ripple affects on others--the young adult child, the older retired parent and possibly the middle-aged persons own support system in old age.

Mid-life Challenges Program Development

This group of educators was formed to discuss middle age, the possibility of investigating mid-life concerns, and the formation of education and support groups. The family life educator led the formation of the group by asking key people from nursing, health education, psychology, sociology, counseling, community crisis intervention center and women's studies to join together to discuss these issues.

The group met bi-weekly for four months. A panel discussion was planned with four of the members to present an overview of current information on sex roles, health and psychological concerns of middle age.

An interesting discovery of this group was their enthusiasm for work with the middle age topic and their joy in sharing. The group included three young adults and six middle-aged persons. The discussion was of such a positive nature that the program planned was called Mid-Life Challenges. not concerns.

A mailing list was developed which included the community organizations listed with the Chamber of Commerce, all churches plus specific people from the university campus who might have a special interest. Advertising included the local newspapers, radio station and university news service.

A one night workshop was planned to include a panel discussion the first hour and smaller discussion groups (led by committee members not on the panel) for the second hour. This was to be a pilot program to discover the particular mid-life concerns of participants. A brief questionnaire was developed asking about present concerns and future program suggestions, names, addresses, age and marital status. Table I. This would provide a mailing list for future programming and information.

Program Results

Forty eight women and three men attended the first program. The following is a summary list of the concerns expressed: (1) Career concerns such as goals, changes, beginning a career and career potentials; (2) Time; (3) Caring for and dealing with older parents; (4) Health concerns such as women's health, physical and mental health and personal and family health; (5) Menopause; (6) Pre-retirement; (7) Effect of career, role changes, growing children and aging on marriages and family structure; (8) Assertiveness; (9) Single-parenting; (10) The male response to both the physical and psychological changes of aging; (11) and, a general expansion of the topics of the evening: changing roles, women's health and menopause.

The chief concerns were career, time, elderly family members and health. All expressed the desire for a continuation of programs on middle age.

Evaluation of the first workshop was high. Because the questionnaires revealed strong desire for future programs, plans were developed for listing the group with the University Speakers Bureau, to speak to certain community groups, and to plan for development of mid-life support groups by creating educational opportunities for lay leaders.

The questionnaire was also given to a second workshop concerning family and kin and to a discussion group on middle age. A summary of the results of the total responses from all three groups of middle aged adults is given in Table II. With each of the three groups, the same four issues ranked high.

Family life educators can have the ideal interdisciplinary approach to involve others in taking research to practise in the community. Middle age should not be a time when people feel alone, confused when they might be on top of life, or on a downhill course when there is half of life to live. More people in middle age can experience the joy and redirection of this transition time through knowledge, through understanding, and through empathy in helping their peers to the positive challenge of the middle and older years.

TABLE I

QUESTIONNAIRE
MID-LIFE CHALLENGES

Please fill out the following questionnaire. This information will be useful in planning further programs that are wanted by you and perhaps other participants.

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Phone: _____

Age _____ under 30; _____ 30-35; _____ 36-40; _____ 41-45;

_____ 46-50; _____ 51-55; _____ 56-60; _____ over 65

Are you single, married, widowed, divorced, remarried? (Circle one)

Are you a parent? _____ Age of Children? _____

Other family members living in your home? _____

Do you work? Full-time; part-time; at home. (Circle one or more)

Years of schooling completed. Eighth grade _____ high school _____

College, no. of years _____ Other _____

---

What concerns you most in your life now? _____

_____

_____

What do you anticipate as future life concerns? _____

_____

_____

What kinds of programs would interest you related to mid-life challenges?

_____

_____

Would you participate in such programs? _____

Which day(s) of the week is more likely to be a preference? _____

_____ Time? _____

TABLE II

OUTSTANDING CONCERNS OF MIDDLE-AGED
MID-LIFE CHALLENGES QUESTIONNAIRE

Question asked -- What concerns you most in your life now?

Number of Replies = 73

Replies:

Career.....20
Includes changes in career or boredom with job or pressures of job.

Time.....12
Includes full-time work and family life or other time concerns.

Elderly Family Members.....12

Health - Physical.....10
Family Member.....4
Self.....2
Mental.....2

Pre-Retirement.....6

Financial Concerns.....4

Children Concerns.....4

Singleness.....3

Spouse Concerns.....2

73

Recommendations

In the future development of research and support groups there is a need to discover ways to reach men. Participants indicated that programs should include career development and re-entry, time management, how to relate with elderly parents, specific health education topics, dealing with specific health education topics, dealing with specific marital problems, freeing of personal relationships with children and planning for retirement.

One of the rewards of these group discussions is overcoming pluralistic ignorance which implies the confusion of a time of transitions is only happening to oneself; eliminating guilt over not doing a good job; and sharing coping suggestions. The question needs to be asked, "If this age group is the "sandwiched" generation could it partly be of their own making?"

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